

A man in a military uniform, including a cap and sunglasses, is kneeling on a grassy hillside. He is looking towards the camera. The background shows a residential area with houses and trees.

OCTOBER 2024

## Harry Ruffel – Looking Back on a Great Career

---

READ TIME: 9 MINUTES

A self-described ‘Army Brat,’ Harry-James Ruffel was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky. His family would follow his father’s military career, and by the time Harry was 12 years old he’d already spent half his childhood living in Germany.



*A bit of mischief with black powder mortars and cannons*

“After my dad retired as an Army Major in 1967, our family would eventually settle in Long Island,” Harry explained. “During high school I made the decision to apply to Trinidad State. Growing up around the military and many types of firearms, I always had an interest in shooting. And after learning about Gunsmithing at Trinidad State, I knew where I wanted to be.”

The transition from Long Island to Trinidad was an easy one. “Between the coal miners and the ranchers, the community feel was very casual and welcoming,” he said. “There was so much history to learn about. Western history, coal and steel industry histories, and even an old World War II prison camp not far away.”

“Trinidad was an amazingly old and charming town,” Harry continued. “We had an A&W Restaurant right next to the campus, a Dairy Queen on the south side of town and a Pizza Hut under the interstate. The local movie theater was the first opera house opened west of the Mississippi. They would show 30-40 minutes of previews before every movie—and most of those previews never came to Trinidad!”



*Harry at Graduation*



*Bill Prator taught machine shop and related topics. He also taught us bluing and color case hardening*

“I lived in the dormitory for all three years that I attended Trinidad State,” Harry explained. “This put me in close contact with fellow students in the Gunsmithing programs, allowing us to all learn from each other.”

Harry studied Gunsmithing from 1974 until his graduation in 1976. He credits the instructors for instilling a strong discipline into this work.

“They pushed us hard but made it clear why something had to be done a certain way,” he explained. “They emphasized the difference between being a craftsman and a mechanic. We learned to take pride in our work. From fit and finish—to how we interacted with others—it was all important.”

After briefly moving away after graduation, Harry returned in 1977 to participate in the Certificate of Achievement program for Gun Repair.



*Ed Shulin taught woodworking and stock making*



*Charles 'Chuck' Bricker developed and taught the Gun Repair program*

“Calling that program ‘Gun Repair’ was perhaps simplistic,” Harry said. “The course was a factory-approved program that prepared us to conduct warranty repairs. All the major gun makers of the time, except Ruger and High Standard, provided us with the weapons and tools to learn these advanced skills.”



*Gun Repair class in 1977*

After completing this program in 1977, Harry moved to Los Angeles to begin his career with Pachmayr Gun Works.



Those familiar with the M1911 pistol will know its storied history. Originating in the late 1890s, it became a prototype for a self-loading, semi-automatic handgun desired by the U.S. military at the time. Gun manufacturers from around the country were making advances to better prepare soldiers for combat. The M1911 emerged as the top choice.

During the early years of the Great Depression, Frank Pachmayr started his gunsmithing career. He would subsequently rise to international acclaim after improving the M1911 into a gun that's become widely regarded as today's most popular combat/target pistol.

"After I left Trinidad for Los Angeles, I started my career with Frank Pachmayr at Pachmayr Gun Works," Harry said. "He had a manufacturing operation—but PGW also provided a full-service gunsmithing program. Frank hired me and I became their newest gunsmith."

"When I arrived, they were heavily involved in the production of a 1911-based handgun referred to as the 'Pachmayr Combat Special,'" Harry explained.



*Harry with a Pachmayr Combat Special made for shooting champion Ray Champman*

"These were 1911s that had been accurized, had adjustable sights, trigger jobs, and various other 'combat' improvements. This made that weapon usable for International Practical Shooting Competitions."

While the 1911s were a top priority for PGW, the range of gunsmithing projects ran the full gamut of services, from basic repairs to refinishing to custom rifles and shotguns.

"The weapons came to Pachmayr from many sources—including from many famous Hollywood stars," Harry said. "We also worked on guns from famed industry journalists like Charlie Askins, or from foreign customers who brought us their hunting weapons—manufacturers like Purdey, Holland and Holland, and Merkel."

While in Los Angeles, Harry decided to approach a local California Army National Guard unit to see if he could work with their weapons as well. They developed a good relationship, enabling him to work with varieties of machine guns and other restricted weapons.

“I kept building my knowledge—always learning,” he said. “I even ran their ranges when they needed a little help for training or for annual qualification.”

Continuing at PGW, Harry kept developing the skills he’d learned at Trinidad State.

“This included hand filing, polishing, all the hand work to build your first rifle,” he said. “From working with lathes and milling machines to forging your scrappers, chisels and gouges in order to build your first stock.”

“These were the days when ready made parts for customizing a 1911 were not available,” he added. “We had to make extended slide stops, extended thumb safeties, or beavertail safeties from scratch. Either through welding or silver soldering, we added material to the existing parts. And then you had to shape those masses to the correct shape for the intended ergonomics, including serrations or checkering.”

### Share Your Alumni Story

Alumni stories like Harry’s will soon be added to a permanent website celebrating these men and women. To share your story for potential inclusion, please contact Toni DeAngelis at [toni.deangelis@trinidadstate.edu](mailto:toni.deangelis@trinidadstate.edu) or 719-846-5520.

All the while, Harry focused on building his knowledge, working on the manufacturing side as well with tool and die makers, artist, engravers and many other skilled craftsmen who produced the many products available from PGW.

“We were not mechanics—we took great pride in what we did at PGW,” he said. “We were artists in the gun world, proud of the work we did to support great shooters like Ray Chapman and Ross Seyfried. Our accuracy was top notch without sacrificing reliability.”

“My early training at Trinidad State prepared me very well to do the fine work required at PGW. It allowed me to grow from the student that I was—into the craftsman I became.”



Harry would transition from PGW to Kings Gun Works in the fall of 1981. Although it was a smaller company, Kings was well-versed in all aspects of gunsmithing in addition to its own line of products. At this time Harry took another pivotal step. He joined the California Army National Guard.

“This was part of my life plan,” he explained. “Joining exposed me to a range of weapons beyond those available in the traditional civilian market—again, expanding my skills.”

“I wanted a full-time career that would help me grow professionally and support my family, while continuing working with firearms and gunsmithing,” Harry continued. “To succeed in gunsmithing you needed to build your own business, which can be a hard path to take. The men I worked with who tried to create a business struggled—they only lasted a few years. Eventually, they either went back to work for a large company or left gunsmithing altogether.”

Harry continued with Kings Gun Works and the Capone family until September of 1982, when he made his transition to the US Border Patrol. This move would launch a 30-year career with the Border Patrol. His life plan was unfolding very well.



Unlike our official, recognized Ports of Entry, the US Border Patrol covers all the territory in between. After joining, Harry moved to Laredo, Texas where he became a Border Patrol Agent charged with covering a 136-mile stretch along the Texas-Mexico border.

“We mostly worked outside the cities in undeveloped areas,” he explained. “Our agents have access to all lands up to 25 miles from the international boundary. We worked the highways and byways. Patrolling the ranchlands and the back country had us in all types of off-road vehicles, including motorcycles and even on horseback.”



*Harry at the border with Mexico in the background*

Harry continued to utilize his gunsmithing skills. He began by customizing field weapons, before later upgrading other weapons—like 870 shotguns, after Remington made changes to enhance their safety. He also performed tests when new ammunitions were issued to field agents.

“The difference between civilian gunsmithing and what I did in the Border Patrol is that lives depended upon the results,” he said.



*Intercepting a smuggled tiger at the border*

“During my time in Texas, we didn’t just catch people from Mexico or other Central and South American countries,” he explained. “I’ve caught people from Europe, Asia and Africa. And it wasn’t just people. We intercepted all kinds of smuggled goods—from animals to drugs, from cigarettes to liquor.”

“It was a different adventure every day. I could write a book.”



In 1990, Harry was promoted and transferred to the Border Patrol Academy in Brunswick, GA. Becoming a firearms instructor, he provided both skills and the mentoring needed to apply those skills effectively. The Academy also served as the knowledge base for firearms and ammunition for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

“In that role we tested weapons and ammunition that could be deployed by the armed officers and agents within the INS,” Harry said.

During this time, changes were made within the INS that took the testing and evaluation of weapons and ammunition from the Border Patrol Academy and placed

them in the hands of a new entity within the INS called the National Firearms Unit (NFU).

“My duties at the Border Patrol Academy expanded with the NFU,” Harry said.

“They took the procurement of new weapons and ammunition to a new level of quality for all armed law enforcement officers within the INS, including the Border Patrol. I was part of a team that recommended transitioning from revolvers to semi-automatic handguns, including a specific shift from the .357 Magnum to the .40 S&W as our duty round.”



In May of 2001, Harry would transfer to Border Patrol Headquarters in Washington, DC. On September 11th, the world would change permanently.

“We did so many things after the events of September 11th to strengthen our national borders,” Harry said. “It was a challenging and amazing time. The threats to our borders were never more apparent.”

As the INS and the NFU became more involved with large procurements of firearms and ammunition, Harry became the Border Patrol’s go to person for the NFU. Many of the test protocols associated with procurement were based on guidelines produced by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and its National Institute of Justice (NIJ). They were not always the best options for all parties.

“The intent of the DOJ/NIJ was to provide guidelines that would apply to all law enforcement,” he explained. “It was well-intended, but the Border Patrol is a unique organization that works in a different environment than most law enforcement entities.”

“I was also part of a team that produced detailed suggestions to the NFU to improve and strengthen test protocols. These enhanced guidelines subsequently influenced the future procurements of all firearms and ammunitions sought by the INS, and later the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), for all law enforcement functions.”



During this time Harry would also become the ‘use of force’ contact person at the Border Patrol, investigating both shootings and unintentional discharges of firearms. “In those cases, I was able to diagnose whether or not the weapon involved was functioning correctly or, in some cases, whether it was human error that caused the discharge.”



After a 30-year career, Harry retired in 2013 as an Assistant Chief of the United States Border Patrol.

“It was a fitting culmination,” Harry said. “I went from being a line agent in Laredo, Texas to training new agents as they began their careers—to running and managing national programs for the entire Border Patrol.”

“Even though I was given an opportunity to manage national programs, the core principle was always the same—giving our agents the best opportunity to make it home to their families should they ever have to use force of any type.”

“During my entire career, I never forgot the basic skills I learned at Trinidad State,” he added. “I have no doubt those early lessons enabled me to make the lives of our agents safer.”



When asked if Harry had any words of wisdom for today’s students, he replied, “have a plan.”

“I’ve loved firearms my whole life, which probably comes from my father’s military career,” he said. “His work ethic and honesty were a standard that I strove to keep throughout my life. It was a guiding example.”

“When I saw a path for gunsmithing at Trinidad State, I followed that path. This led me to begin my career at Pachmayr Gun Works, which worked for me until I recognized the challenges in building a gunsmithing career.”

“My plan then pointed me towards a career with the Border Patrol, which allowed me to continue working with firearms while providing for my family. Having retired as an Assistant Chief, things worked out better than I ever could have imagined.”

Harry would meet the “love of my life, Dianne” while working in Georgia. Today, they are enjoying their retirement years in full.

“In addition to our five children and 11 grandchildren, my wife and I both love to travel by train and cruising,” Harry said. “We’ve even combined the two. We once cruised from New York City to San Francisco via the Panama Canal, and then returned to New York City by train.”



*Harry enjoying his retirement years*

“When I first retired, we celebrated with a cruise around the world,” he said. “We traveled west from New York City, returning 105 days later to New York City.”

“Even in retirement, the Border Patrol is still like a fraternity—you never lose touch,” Harry said. “We just celebrated the Border’s Patrol’s 100th Anniversary this year. I also belong to the Fraternal Order of Retired Border Patrol Officers, which keeps us informed about the ongoing issues that plague our borders. I stay in touch with many friends around the USA.”

“Looking back, everything started with a great base given to me by the staff and fellow students of Trinidad State. If I could say one thing to today’s students, it would be, ‘do what you love to do and do it well. Create and live your plan—and plan for that future retirement and enjoy that as well. It’s a great journey.’”

Harry and Dianne Ruffel are retired and living in Florida.